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NOW SEEKING MORE SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT

Walter J. Hickey

In mid-August the town sat stillborn. Vacuum-packed in suffocating heat. People were static, afraid that perspiration caused by the slightest movement would be enough to steal their last precious ounce of fluid and merge their spirits with the fine, hot summer dust. Porch swings didn't creak, birds refused to fly - even electric fans and air conditioners, like wise, old coolies, worked slowly and deliberately at their jobs.

Russell Dobbs didn't have a job. He'd lost it two months ago. Since then he'd been spending a lot of time thinking a lot about his options. At his age, 40, he'd be expected to do something sensible, something "adult." This narrowed the field. He needed a job without pressure. Something low-keyed, routine. A doctor had told him to learn to relax.

He'd begun to study meditation, hoping that careful thought would improve his ability to make intelligent decisions, but thinking could be exhausting - especially in the heat. His kids voluntarily reported his progress, "Mommy, he's *staring* again. He's getting real spooky!"

When he was a kid had liked to daydream. To prolong the experience, he practiced hard, concentrated stares that blurred every-

thing. Objects melted like crayons in the sun. He was trying it now and it still worked. *It was like slipping into a peculiar state of awareness, or going into a trance, and it helped keep him cool.*

His wife was working up a sweat trying to clean the burnt remains of dinner from the skillet, while he just sat there staring. Every once in a while she looked over at him, rolled her eyes and made smacking sounds of disgust.

He was getting up the energy to do something. Maybe get a haircut before the grocery shopping. He was supposed to look for work today but he'd decided he didn't have the energy. One of the big discount stores was mass hiring, and though he could probably snag a job, he didn't want to. He thought, "I can do better, and with Dora working we're not starving to death."

Usually active, not industrious by any means but consistent, he'd nurtured a lethargy lately that was so strong he'd gone back to the doctor. "Maybe it's a low grade infection, Doc, or the beginning of Alzheimer's. I don't feel sick but why take chances?" He always tried to provide the doctor optional prognoses. "Besides, it's so hot! The weather would make anybody sick."

St. Louis had been under a "heat warning" for the last week and several older people had died. One guy died watching game shows in the afternoon. At least that's what he appeared to be doing when his neighbor found him. The news said it was 108 in the house and the guy kept all his doors and windows locked. It was a high crime area.

Russell stared through the glass doors of the kitchen into the backyard. His eyes rolled slightly and his muscles started to relax. Everything in his visual path spilled over like a tipped palette.

"Why don't you do something if you're bored?" Dora's got a voice like sheet metal. He jumped and clutched at his heart.

"Jesus Christ, Dora! I'm not bored. I'm just thinking for a minute and then I'm gonna go."

"Well, we need decaf and Tampax."

"Jesus. I'm really sick of this shit. Ya know this happens every month. I'd think you'd catch on by now. You're 41 years old."

"Fine! Don't buy it. I'll just bleed all over the place."

"I'll get em, but it's the last time. Next time forget it."

* * * *

God it was hot! He'd forgotten the barber shops were closed on Mondays so he stopped in the park to look at the grocery list and map out a strategy. He liked to rewrite the list so it followed the layout of the store and got him out of there a lot faster. Dora wrote things down as they occurred to her. Haphazardly. Then, at the store, she would sort through coupons; scrutinize the salt content; look for "No Cholesterol" slapped onto the labels and check for the cheapest price even if it only amounted to pennies. "They add up you know." In a million years, she'd have a million dollars.

He was sitting in a park full of kids with mommies and baby sitters of all stripes, from middle-aged singles to high schoolers off for the summer. Only the kids didn't seem to mind the weather. They played their games with the intensity of addicts. It was mid-morning and the heat of the day was yet to come, but it was already steaming. Later, even the kids would be indoors. The afternoon sun could wring people out like rags and the heat became so oppressive even flies seemed to breath hard. It was becoming as much a part of summer as baseball and mosquitos.

Sweat pooled around his eyebrows. Salty, it ran down into his eyes, and he wiped his face on his sleeves. Russell leaned back to get comfortable and he practiced his stare. He let himself relax and the kids seemed to freeze; then everything blurred and the noise took over. His breathing slowed and he drifted...

It was October in Chicago and there was a naked woman walking down Michigan Avenue. She wasn't drunk or battered. She didn't appear crazy. She appeared to be marvelously healthy, pink-cheeked and smiling, and chugged up the Avenue under a fairly good head of steam. People can be oblivious to most anything in a large city. But it was 3 o'clock; rush hour was getting underway in the city's advertising district. The Chicago Police wrapped her in a blanket and took her away. He read all of this in the newspaper.

His office, where he read the papers every morning, was a cubicle splashed with 80-watts of white Sylvania glare. He was a public relations man -- professional flim-flam. He sat behind a standard desk littered with multi-leveled piles of notes, drafts of stories, media kits, photos. He wished he'd been on the street yesterday to see the lady. He wondered about the color of her hair. He thought about her breasts -- picturing shapes, sizes, hues. They were flushed, crimson, but they weren't cold. They were warm, firm, with an athletic

tautness that pointed them toward Polaris...

"Wake up, Mr.. You'll get sick if you sleep here. It's too hot." A skinny kid with a rodent face poked him with a Wiffle Ball bat.

"ALRIGHT! I'M NOT ASLEEP, THANK YOU!" He always woke up sounding angry, whether he'd had five minutes or all night. He always felt drugged, always felt like when he slept his heart went to sleep too. He wiped his face on his sleeve and checked his pocket for the grocery list

As he walked, he asked himself how he would accurately describe his four decades of life. *Uneventful!* He considered Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination and his mother's death as the benchmarks in his otherwise "cradle to grave" existence. His marriage, children, education were all uniform, routine facts of life; all strikingly similar to millions of other people. He was just the same. No difference! Murderers, bums and maniacs were at least different. Sameness mortified him.

He stepped from the curb into the street and was jolted by the sound of screaming tires on hot pavement. He turned his upper body back toward the sidewalk, and pivoting, crudely executed a Veronica just in time to escape being slammed by a square, grey Subaru.

The driver laid on the horn. "Wake up, Dickhead! Next time I'll knock yer ass across the street." His tires screamed again as he made the corner and was gone.

Russel was shaking hard. He needed to sit down somewhere and staked his claim in someone's front yard because it looked clean, well-mowed, safe. A womb with astro-turf. He practiced breathing, deep from the diaphragm. He could be dead. It was that close. Or maybe he wouldn't have died for a week or so, and every bone in his body would have been shattered like a sheet of safety glass.

He could have been killed all right. But worse was realizing that maybe it didn't matter. A thousand spiders crawl out of an egg and one or two smashed flat really don't make any measurable difference. There's just too many of them. And they're all the same. He thought about this a long time, staring. Placing his life in freeze-frame. After a few minutes, he took his own pulse and then closed his eyes, "just for a few minutes."

From where he sat he knew it was her leaving the grocery store. It had been maybe twenty years since he'd seen her. But he knew it was Jill by the way seeing her seized his guts and throat. She was with

her mother and a little girl with her own fine, white-chocolate hair. She had the same walk - a familiar, naive bounce. She still looked delicate, fragile, beautiful. He had loved her deeply once. But she wasn't part of his grand design. When he'd seen her picture in a wedding announcement some years ago, he'd seized up just like now.

He watched them move through the parking lot toward a station wagon, her mother and daughter content to chatter along. He thought about racing over to her and saying - Hello! About the wonderfully happy reunion. About seeing her eyes again. Did they wrinkle when she smiled? Was she ready to leave her husband? Just waiting for the opportunity?

Or did she love her husband?

Was she happy? Wealthy and content? Were her memories different than his? Was *he* a pleasant memory?

He sat and stared at her car, watching till it drove back through twenty years of time and space to the past. Back to Chicago or New York. He'd heard once where she lived, but couldn't remember. He would meet her again someday when they could be alone and talk. In five minutes they'd be in love again. Renewed. Two sad-eyed innocents, who were simply predetermined: programmed by a cynical God with a cruel, Woody Allen sense of humor.

Now they could be together. Discard the baggage of yesterday. Rebuild. Now content. The long prison sentences of their past decisions were over. Just to look into her face and *know* that at last *everything right is* enough.

Russell felt nourished now. He could go on. Take the next step. Move slowly and deliberately this time. Think things out first. But now he'd better get the shopping done and go home.